DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 476 JC 820 105

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TITLE The Characteristics of Very Effective Teachers in Urban Community Colleges.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (West Palm Beach, FL, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; Faculty Development; *Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Characteristics; *Teacher Effectiveness; *Teaching Methods; Teaching Skills; Two Year Colleges; Urban Education; *Urban Teaching
IDENTIFIERS *City Colleges of Chicago IL

ABSTRACT

An exploratory study was conducted to identify the characteristics and behaviors related to effective instruction in an urban community college. The 30 instructors selected for the study taught introductory courses in biology, English, mathematics, or social sciences at the City Colleges of Chicago. All had exceptionally high levels of student achievement and low levels of student attrition in these classes and had been identified as exemplary instructors by their academic dean. Structured interviews were conducted with 28 instructors who provided information on personal background; course planning and organization; positive regard for students; use of teaching strategies to foster student participation; and degree and type of feedback, correction, and reinforcement given to students. The study revealed that these exemplary teachers shared many common teaching characteristics and instructional practices, regardless of their academic discipline, age, or experience. Effective teachers were generally well organized and very systematic in their teaching. Although they used primarily whole-group instruction, the teachers emphasized student participation in class. These teachers provided regular and specific feedback on student learning progress and had a high positive regard for their students, which they communicated by learning students' names and encouraging individual conferences. The study report details methodology, limitations, and findings and includes the survey instrument. (KL)

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ED213476

The Characteristics of Very Effective Teachers in Urban Community Colleges

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West Palm Beach, FL, 1982

IC 820 105

Abstract

This study was an exploratory effort to determine the characteristics and behaviors of exceptionally effective urban community college teachers. Data were gathered through a series of indepth interviews with 28 college faculty members who had been identified as "exemplary" teachers. All of the teachers interviewed taught introductory level courses in biology, English, mathematics or social science. Results showed that these effective teachers shared many common teaching characteristics and instructional practices, but few common personal characteristics. Implications for the improvement of teaching are discussed.

The Characteristics of Very Effective Teachers in Urban Community Colleges

In recent years many educational studies have sought to identify the characteristics and behaviors of very effective teachers. Using a variety of student learning outcomes as the criteria of effectiveness, these studies have been moderately successful in determining the specific characteristics and behaviors that relate to effective instruction in elementary schools (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds & Fredericksen, 1978; Medley, 1977) and secondary schools (Rutter, et al., 1979; Stallings, 1980). Few studies, however, have focused attention on instruction at the post-secondary level, and fewer still have considered the unique aspects of instruction in community colleges.

McKeachie (1963) reviewed a variety of studies on college and university teaching in an attempt to identify the elements of effective instruction at the post-secondary level. These studies considered aspects such as lecturing and discussion techniques, class size, heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping practices, and student characteristics. All of these studies were rather narrow in scope, however, and none provided a comprehensive description of the elements that contributed to effective instruction.

In a study to identify the characteristics that differentiate good from poor college teachers, Hildebrand (1973) had both students and teachers rate a series of statements about teachers and teaching. A factor analysis of the results yielded five factors that distinguished good teachers: command of subject, organization and clarity, instructor-

group interactions, instructor-individual interactions and dynamism/ enthusiasm. It was not determined, however, whether these characteristics actually related to better student learning, or simply represented instructional preferences.

The present study was designed as an exploratory effort to identify the characteristics and behaviors related to effective instruction in the community college setting. The data for this study were gathered through a series of indepth interviews with community college faculty members who had been identified as "exemplary" teachers. It was generally thought that information stemming from an exploratory study such as this would be useful not only as a guide to other more systematic studies, but also to those concerned with the improvement of teaching and learning in community colleges.

METHOD

Sample Selection

For this exploratory investigation, a sample of 30 unusually effective teachers were selected from six community college campuses. These teachers were all employed as full-time faculty members in the City Colleges of Chicago, a multi-campus community college system. Two sources of information were utilized in selecting these teachers. First, system-wide data were used to identify teachers who taught introductory level courses in one of four academic disciplines (biology, English, mathematics, and social science) and who also had exceptionally high levels of student achievement paired with low rates of student attrition in these courses. Second, the academic deans at each of the campuses involved in the study

were asked to identify teachers in each of the four disciplines whom they considered to be "exemplary," based upon student evaluations of teaching and informal sources of feedback. Thirty teachers were then selected for the study through a synthesis of these two sources of information; that is, all of the selected teachers had relatively high levels of student achievement in their classes, low rates of student attrition, and had been identified as exemplary by an academic dean.

Development of the Interview Form

In order to facilitate consistency and comparability among interviews, a standard set of interview questions was developed. These were very general questions that inquired about characteristics and behaviors that had been identified as important in research on effective instruction at the secondary and college levels, and in studies on students' attrition from post-secondary schools (Beal and Noel, 1980; Pantages and Creedan, 1978). A total of 21 topic questions were included in the interview form, plus a set of probes and alternative questions. These questions were first reviewed and revised to assure a colloquial style and an even flow throughout the interview. Following a series of trial interviews and subsequent discussions with the interviewed teachers, the questions were further evaluated and revised. (See Appendix for the final interview questions.)

Training the Interviewers

Three interviewers took part in several stages of training prior to conducting their first interview. Initial preparation consisted of orienting each interviewer to the goals of the project. After this initial orientation and discussion, a first-draft of the interview questions was reviewed. Next the interviewers observed a demonstration

interview conducted by a highly experienced interviewer who was familiar with the purposes of the study. The subject of the demonstration interview was an experienced teacher. Following the demonstration the interview questions and questioning techniques were discussed in detail. This discussion led to some revisions in the interview questions and format.

The final stage in the training process was a tape-recorded, trial interview conducted individually by each of the interviewers. Following these trial interviews the interviewers met, listened to the tapes of each other, and discussed their interviewing consistencies and differences. This was done to further insure that the interviewers were seeking the same data and were using similar means of collecting information.

The Interviews

At the conclusion of the training sessions, each of the interviewers was given a list of names containing a random third of the thirty exemplary teachers. Interviewers were instructed to schedule the interviews at the convenience of the teacher, either at the college or at the home of the teacher. The exemplary teachers were guaranteed anonymity in the analysis of the data. All of the interviews were tape-recorded.

RESULTS

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed and summarized by the interviewers. Two of the 30 exemplary teachers were on leave from their college and could not be interviewed. Therefore, a total of 28 interviews were reviewed and summarized. The results reported here represent a synthesis of those summaries. Direct quotations from the transcripts of the interviews are inserted in these summaries as illustrations of the teachers' responses.

Background

Among the interviewed exemplary teachers there were approximately equal numbers of white and minority teachers. Most of the teachers had about seven or eight years of teaching experience at the community college level. The only common feature in the backgrounds of these teachers was that nearly all had taught at either the high school or elementary level prior to teaching at the community college. Most had earned teaching certificates and hence, had some formal training in education in addition to their training in a particular discipline.

Planning, Organization and Cues

All of the exemplary teachers who were interviewed spent considerable time planning and organizing their courses prior to the first day of class. Before a semester begins, most have constructed detailed outlines of the entire course. These outlines typically consist of an overall description of the course, clear course objectives, and a set of absolute (versus relative) standards for evaluating students' learning and assigning course grades. Many of the teachers also list the topics that will be discussed at each class session together with the specific readings and homework for each class. However, these teachers also feel strongly about the importance of being flexible and responsive to students' special needs and interests, and are often willing to alter parts of their courses and schedules to be adaptive to the students.

During the very first class session these exemplary teachers spend about half of the time going over course outlines with the students, and about half getting acquainted with students. ("...during the first hour I introduce myself and I introduce the course.") This first class is

generally the time when teachers discuss how they would like to work together with students to accomplish the course objectives. ("It's kind of telling them what they can expect from me and some things I expect from them.") In describing the course, the teachers stress objectives, grading criteria, and their expectations for success. ("They know from the very beginning that there are standards that we are going to meet.") In addition, the teachers stress their confidence in the students and the importance of hard work and class attendance.

As the course progresses, the exemplary teachers continue to spend a great deal of time in planning and organization activities. Most of the class sessions are carefully planned with a clear format and structure. Class sessions generally have a clear design: an introduction at the beginning, a summary at the end, and a clear sequence of developmental steps in between. ("First I tell them what I'm going to teach them; then I teach those things; then I tell them what I taught them.") Although most of the teachers remain flexible during the class sessions and allow discussion and activities to vary with students' interest, all stress the importance of organization and a clear direction to class activities.

Positive Regard for Students

These exemplary teachers all emphasize the importance of expressing positive regard for their students. They perceive that students need to be regarded as individuals with identifiable and unique strengths, weaknesses, and interests. ("I try to be aware of them and try to let them know my interest in them.") Most teachers use some time during the first period to become familiar with their students and continue to exchange personal information throughout the semester. A few of

the teachers use formal student data sheets to ask about hobbies and interests, while others elicit this information orally and informally. The teachers generally learn their students' names, and address them by name.

One aspect of perceiving students' need to be treated individually is a reluctance on the part of teachers to embarrass or harass students with questions or demands, in spite of their high expectations of students ("I talk with them, and short of badgering..."). The teachers have learned that the students want an involved and interested teacher, but one who knows when to draw the line between interest and intimidation or embarrassment.

The teachers all seem to stress the importance of student-teacher and student-student interactions for professional rather than for personal reasons. The teachers believe that the interactions are important for students' academic growth and not necessarily for personal growth.

A few of the teachers require outside meetings with the students at regular intervals, but for the most part these out of class meetings are recommended rather than required. A frequent tactic of the teachers is to mark unsatisfactory student work with "See Me." This is discussed more fully in a subsequent section of this paper.

Encouraging Student Participation

The exemplary teachers interviewed use primarily whole-group instruction followed by discussions and question-answer periods. During their lectures, however, these teachers consistently ask questions and encourage student involvement in order to assure that the material is

clearly understood. Generally the biology and mathematics teachers tend to stress the importance of the class for program and degree requirements, while English and social science teachers emphasize the importance of these subjects for careers and life.

To further stimulate classroom participation and attention, many of these teachers include instruction in higher-order skills and expect students to think through the problems inherent in the subject ("I want them to learn by doing in problem-solving situations.")

When asking questions during presentations, most of these teachers first address the question to the entire class, and then call upon a student whom they are fairly confident knows the answer. This helps them build a comfortable, non-threatening atmosphere in class and encourages participation. It also helps to avoid publicly embarrassing any students. To further encourage student involvement and participation, all of these teachers indicate that they move about the classroom during presentations and especially while students were working independently or in group activities.

A subjective estimate of student participation is also used by most of these exemplary teachers as an index of the effectiveness of their teaching. If most students are actively participating and involved during a particular class, the class is judged to be generally successful. However, if students are not participating in the class or are not involved in the instruction, then a change in presentation is usually sought.

Feedback, Correctives, and Reinforcement

All of these exemplary teachers strongly emphasize the importance of providing students with regular feedback on their learning progress. In most cases the feedback is provided to students through written comments on assignments or exams. The comments are likely to be very specific. ("I mark very thoroughly everything they are doing.") Often the teachers identify what is wrong with a response and how it can be made better. ("I direct them to where they can find the way to correct it.")

Students who have particular difficulties in a course are usually asked to arrange meetings with the teacher for individual help. ("I write 'See Me' on the paper...") Some of the teachers hold these meetings in their offices, while others arrange appointments in mutually convenient places. Following the meetings, many teachers recommend specific alternative learning resources such as learning laboratories, computer-assisted instruction facilities, tutoring services, or the library. ("...one way or another they are brought up to a particular level.") Often the teachers will help the students set up schedules for visiting these outside resources.

Those exemplary teachers who employ mastery learning strategies generally have a more structured process for correcting learning difficulties. They usually require specific assignments from students related to corrective work and often check these to provide students with additional feedback.

All of the interviewed teachers also stress the importance of rewarding students for progress in the learning. Again, many use

specific comments on tests and papers for this purpose. They particularly emphasize students' efforts on tests and papers and make special note of improvements. Some teachers praise students privately before or after a class while others mentioned their excellent work or great progress during the class. A common practice among English teachers is to read aloud excellent papers after privately asking permission of the student. This is followed by a discussion of the paper involving the student-author. Mastery learning teachers make special announcements of those students who reach the mastery criteria and in many cases, give mastery certificates to these students.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

There were two striking features among the interviews of these 28 very effective community college teachers. The first was their consistency. These exemplary teachers shared many common characteristics and behaviors, regardless of their academic discipline, their age, or their experience. Second was the fact that most of these shared characteristics were teaching characteristics and instructional practices rather than personal characteristics of the teachers. Since teaching characteristics are generally easier to change than are personal characteristics, this finding presents an optimistic view of the potential of staff development efforts.

The effective teachers interviewed in this study were generally very well organized and very systematic in their teaching. They identified for their students what was important to learn and what was expected of them in the course. Although they used primarily whole-group instruction, these teachers placed great emphasis on student participation and involvement during class sessions. Students were given regular and specific

feedback on their learning progress and were rewarded for improvement and success. In addition, these teachers had a very positive regard for students and communicated this by learning their students' names and encouraging students with difficulties to come to their offices for individual help.

Because many community college faculty members begin teaching without formal training in education, they must rely upon staff development programs to help them improve the quality of their teaching. Programs that focus on teaching characteristics such as those identified in this study are likely to be the most useful in helping new community college teachers develop effective teaching practices and aiding experienced teachers in improving the effectiveness of their instruction.

The selectiveness of the subsample of teachers used in this study does limit the generalizability of the results. However, these findings do have implications for further studies on the elements of effective instruction in community college settings. Additionally, more systematic studies are needed on whether these characteristics do differentiate more effective from less effective teachers, and whether less effective teachers can be helped to incorporate these practices and behaviors in order to improve their teaching.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Crystal Crocheron, Dorothy Fuerst, Josephine Perry, and Peggy Tedder. These Center staff members conducted and transcribed the interviews described in this paper.

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APPENDIX

Questions To Be Asked In Conducting Teacher Interviews.

1. What is your previous teaching experience?
   (probes: At CC, # of years; outside CC, # of years, level(s))
2. How do you prepare for teaching the introductory course in your department?
3. What do you do in the first class session? (OR: Take me through the first class session).
4. Can you tell me what happens in a typical class period?
5. How do you evaluate students?
6. How do you (are you able to) assess student progress in class?
   (probe: how?)
7. What do you do when you see your students falling behind?
8. How do students in your class know when they are doing poorly or doing well?
9. How do you reward or reinforce student learning?
10. Do you recommend any particular out-of-class or in-class learning resources or study techniques to your students?
11. Can you describe to me what the interactions between you and your students are like in a typical class?
    (probes: How often do you ask students questions? How often do they ask you questions?)
12. How do you get students to participate in the class?
13. Do you try to motivate students in class? How?
14. How do you think students determine what is important for them to learn in your class?
    (teacher specified vs. student discovery)

15. How often do students see you outside of class?
(probe: who initiates this?)

16. What percent of the students do you think are able to really master the subject?
Do you feel that certain students in your class are unteachable? About what percent?
(The unwritten question of teacher expectations.)

17. In your own teaching experience, what distinguishes a good class from a poor class?

18. What rewards or satisfaction do you gain from teaching? What do you like least about teaching?

19. How do you judge your overall effectiveness as a teacher?

20. What are your suggestions for in-service training for more effective instruction at the City Colleges?

21. Are there any other important aspects of teaching not mentioned that you feel should be covered?

(Then ask permission to call back if information is needed)

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